Writing Process Meets Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich

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Yesterday was the first day of school. Overcoming the fear of being a hated teacher, I assigned homework the first time I met my Research and Writing students. I asked my eleventh grade, college-bound, novice writers to write down the directions for making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Aside from the blank stare I got from a foreign exchange student, all of them got to work quickly on the task before them.

Within a minute, though, I got the question I was waiting for. A student said, "Why are we doing this?"

My response: "To learn about writing process."

His response: "What does a peanut butter and jelly sandwich have to do with the writing process?"

So, what do peanut butter and jelly sandwiches have in common with process writing? A lot, it turns out.

Today my students returned with their directions, and I had all of the materials necessary to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on a table in front of the class. I asked one student to get me started. He said, "Put the peanut butter on the bread." I picked up the jar of peanut butter and set it on top of the loaf of bread. The class groaned, but I was able to make my first point: just as we do when making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, we go through steps when writing that we don't think about.

To my students, it was a given that I should have opened the bread package, pulled out two slices of bread, opened the jar of peanut butter, and used the knife to create a smooth layer of peanut butter on one piece of bread. While this is true, it is also true that we all go through some sort of prewriting activity before we begin constructing a first draft. It may not be tangible or deliberate, but few people actually sit down to face the computer screen without an idea of what they'd like to say in their writing. Virtually all of my students agreed that they do, at least, have some thoughts formulated before they start pressing the keys. Admittedly, one student held fast to the belief that she brings nothing with her to the draft; she just creates what her muse gives her.

As we proceeded with the peanut butter and jelly sandwich making, it wasn't long before petty arguments arose. "The peanut butter and jelly HAVE to go on the same piece of bread!" "You HAVE to use a different knife for the peanut butter and jelly!" These arguments beautifully illustrated my next point: though we all have different means, we all make it to the end. Many students are taught THE writing process from early in their educational careers. They believe that all good writing must start with an outline or a web, which morphs into a first draft riddled with blatant spelling and grammar mistakes. This first draft then must be carefully reviewed by a group of peers and perhaps the teacher in order to become a polished "final" draft that needs no further attention.

While, in essence, this is true, we are misleading our students if we don't tell them that THE writing process looks different for all people. Just as some writers choose to begin with an outline on paper, others begin with only general ideas. Some writers revise

and edit WHILE they write; others make it a separate step. If we try to change the writing habits of our students to match THE writing process, rather than helping them improve THEIR writing processes, we are making the difficult task of teaching writing even harder.

Though I thought I had pulled every lesson possible from a meager sandwich, the making of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich held one more lesson for us today. A fairly heated debate ensued about whether we should cut the sandwich or not, and if we should cut it, how it should be cut. The lesson: all writers have unique final products, and this doesn't make one better than another. Whether you make peanut butter and jelly triangles or an intact sandwich, whether you create a poem or a research paper, the end result of your work is worthwhile and worth sharing.

Who would have thought we could learn so much from such a routine task? The learning occurred when we made the routine unique. That's what we need to be doing with writing. We need to transform writing from a routine requirement to a novel and worthwhile pastime.